

YORK NOTES

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William Shakespeare

OTHELLO

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tensity of his utterance should not prompt us to conclude that he is a poet. Rather it is the playwright striving for a particular dramatic effect, something which would receive acceptance and a ready response from the audience.

The Elizabethan theatre was an intimate theatre (for example, no spectator was more than about 60 feet from the stage), despite the fact that a playhouse like the Globe could hold an audience of between two and three thousand people. Because there was no attempt to think in terms of a 'picture-frame', which is a feature of the modern proscenium-arch stage, the large acting area could be quickly transformed from one locality to another. Thus the action was continuous throughout, and the movement from scene to scene resembles, in its speed, that of the modern film capable of moving wherever the requirements of the action dictate. In addition to these physical characteristics, Shakespeare was perhaps more fortunate than some of his fellow dramatists in that from about 1594 onwards, when he joined the company known as the Chamberlain's Men, he was able to write for specific actors whose talents he knew intimately. This relationship was sustained throughout his working life, and represents possibly the most fruitful cooperation of playwright, actors, and theatre in the history of English drama.

The sources of *Othello*

Shakespeare's main source for *Othello* was probably 'The Story of Disdemona of Venice and The Moorish Captain' which appeared in a collection of Italian stories by Giraldi Cinthio entitled *Gli Hecatommithi*, and which was published in Venice in 1566. Here Shakespeare found the bare outline of his plot, but the addition of certain details and the reworking of others give some important clues to his artistic purpose.

In Cinthio's story only Disdemona is named, 'the 'Moorish Captain' (*Othello*), 'the Ensign' (*Iago*), and 'the Captain' (*Cassio*) being referred to throughout by their titles only. Moreover, the action takes place over a much longer period of time than in Shakespeare's play, allowing a sizeable gap between Disdemona's marriage and the Moorish Captain's appointment to the Governorship of Cyprus. From the outset the only objection to the propriety of their marriage comes from Disdemona's relatives who, we are told, 'did all they could to make her accept a different husband'. The Moorish Captain is characterised as 'a man of great personal courage, who, because he had every advantage of person and had given proofs of military ability and lively intelligence, had a high reputation among the nobility', while Disdemona's love for him was due 'not to an impulse of womanly desire, but to a just appreciation of his worth'. Once married, Cinthio observes that 'they lived

together in such concord and tranquillity, while they were in Venice, that there was never a word—let alone an act—between them that was not affectionate'.

It is the Ensign who intrudes into this idyllic relationship, 'a man of very fine appearance but of the most depraved nature that ever a man had in the world.' The Ensign falls in love with Disdemona, but believes that she is in love with the Captain (*Cassio* in Shakespeare's play). He therefore seeks to kill his rival, and vows to turn the Moorish Captain against Disdemona. Cinthio makes the Ensign's love for Disdemona the main motive for his villainous plot, whereas in Shakespeare's play this detail is peripheral. The Captain is deprived of his rank for brawling, and the Ensign (who in Cinthio's story is not jealous of his rival's promotion, and who does not engineer this incident), takes advantage of this to reveal to the Moorish Captain that his wife is adulterous. Meanwhile, the Ensign's three-year-old daughter (who does not appear in Shakespeare's play) steals Disdemona's handkerchief, thus providing the circumstantial evidence which her father will use to convince the Moorish Captain of his wife's guilt. The Captain finds the handkerchief and knowing it to belong to Disdemona, wishes to return it to her. He attempts to, but his visit is used to support the Ensign's allegations against him. Later, the Moorish Captain overhears a conversation between the Ensign and the Captain which is used to intensify his suspicions: 'and putting on an act of astonishment he [the Ensign] contrived by expressive gestures with his head and his hands to seem as though he were listening to extraordinary things.' When Disdemona is confronted with the loss of her handkerchief she is confused and lies, but also, the change in her husband's behaviour causes her, unlike Shakespeare's heroine, to have second thoughts about the marriage:

And I very much fear that I am one who gives an example to young women not to marry against the will of their families. Italian ladies may learn from me not to link themselves to a man whom nature, climate, and manner of life separate from us.

Also, in Shakespeare's play one character, Bianca, is asked to copy the design of the handkerchief, and is the woman whose house *Cassio* frequents, but in Cinthio's story the Captain's 'woman at home who made marvellous embroidery on fine linen' is different from 'the harlot with whom he used to amuse himself'.

Roderigo does not appear at all in Cinthio's story, where it is the Ensign who agrees to kill the Captain. He also plots with the Moorish Captain to kill Disdemona and to make the murder seem like an accident. He does not succeed in his plot to kill the Captain, but one night the Ensign hides in Disdemona's closet and as she approaches he creeps out and hits her 'a terrible blow in the small of the back' with a

stocking filled with sand. After laying her on her bed he splits her head, and he and the Moorish Captain then attempt to conceal the crime by making 'the ceiling timbers of the room fall down, just as they had planned together'. Although the murder goes undetected, the Moorish Captain now begins to realise how much he loved Desdemona and he rejects the Ensign. The Ensign, for his part, seeks to revenge this rejection by informing the Captain that the Moorish Captain had tried to kill him. When the Venetian government hears about these events in Cyprus it recalls the Moorish Captain to Venice and tortures him to find out if they are true, 'But with great fortitude of mind he endured all his torments, and deemed everything with such constancy that nothing could be got out of him'. The Ensign is also tortured, but he ends by dying 'miserably'. The whole of Cinthio's narrative thus becomes a proof of the way in which Providence revenges evil deeds, and he ends by observing that the entire story was revealed 'after his death by the Ensign's wife, who had all along known the truth'.

Shakespeare evidently derived much of the plot, as well as the themes for his play from Cinthio's story. The 'nobility' of the Moorish Captain, and his 'reputation', Desdemona's 'innocence', the sublimity and harmony of their language and its subsequent alteration, are all echoed in the play. The introduction of Roderigo, the gulling of Brabantio, and the final apportioning of the responsibility for Desdemona's murder to Othello himself, indicate a marked shifting away from Cinthio's story as he turned it into a tragic drama.

Cinthio's narrative, however, was by no means Shakespeare's only source. The Chronicles of Hall and Holinshed gave him sufficient material to experiment in the earlier *Richard III* with a prototype of the villainous character of Iago, and with the various methods of engaging the sympathy of the audience for villainy through the judicious use of soliloquy. Also, in *The Rape of Lucrece*, a story popularised in the Middle Ages in Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*, and in Shakespeare's own time in Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566), Shakespeare had begun to explore the kind of colour-symbolism that he later employed in a much more mature way in *Othello*.

In plays such as *Much Ado About Nothing* (1599), and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1600) he explored in dramatic terms the consequences which arise from persons interpreting evidence mistakenly; he developed themes of jealousy and suspicion, although in these two plays he gave them a distinctly comic flavour. But it was to Ben Jonson's play *Every Man in His Humour* (1598) that Shakespeare may have turned for some of the details in *Othello*. Jonson's jealous merchant Thorello may have suggested Othello's name and indeed some of the traits of his character. For example, Thorello's denunciation of the pangs of jealousy that he suffers as a result of his wife Bianca's imagined adultery,

anticipates very precisely the kind of problem that *Othello* explores in fuller tragic terms:

First it begins
Solely to work upon the fantasy,
Filling her seat with such pestiferous air
As soon corrupts the judgement; and from thence
Sends like contagion to the memory,
Still each of other catching the infection,
Which as a searching vapour spreads itself
Confusedly through every sensitive part
Till not a thought or motion in the mind
Be free from the black poison of suspect.

(*Every Man in His Humour*, I.4.203-12)

The context of *Othello*

Othello was first performed in 1604. Although it is the second of the so-called 'major tragedies' coming after *Hamlet* (1600-1), it seems to have much more in common with some of the earlier comedies, and certainly the subject of the cuckolded husband receives treatment in comedies right through to the Restoration. *Othello* is not a play about 'kingship', but rather about human passion. Its scope is, therefore, much narrower and more intense than that of *Hamlet*, or *Macbeth* (1606). It takes material that we usually associate with comedy, and explores its tragic possibilities.

This was not a new departure for Shakespeare. In some of his earlier plays he had attempted to deal alternatively with the comic and tragic implications of particular themes. For example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595) he dramatised the comedy of thwarted love, but a year later *Romeo and Juliet* presented the tragic implications of this same theme. Similarly, in *Othello*, Shakespeare sought to examine the tragic implications of a series of themes to which he had already devoted some attention in earlier comedies. However, the intensity of the play's concern with extreme human passion and with 'evil' indicates a mood far from the exuberance of comic drama.

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare had dealt with the large political questions of 'kingship' and 'order'. In *Othello* he reduced considerably the scale of his artistic vision to focus upon more personal questions of 'judgement', and the extent to which human passion may be controlled. Othello is forced to choose between 'good' (embodied in the love that he shares with Desdemona), and 'evil' (embodied in Iago), but his powers of judgement become corrupted through Iago's villainy. Shakespeare shows us how the force of evil gradually asserts control

over Othello's character, and how his noble mind falls prey to the very barbarism to which he has declared himself an enemy. The tragedy emerges from the paradoxes which this struggle generates, both internally in Othello's own mind, and externally in his relationships with other characters. The struggle ends in murder, but the hero finally manages to re-assert his former nobility and conquers the evil which has corrupted his mind. However, in Shakespearean tragedy generally, such a victory is always qualified. If the hero wins understanding of his character and destiny, then it is always at the expense of life itself. Othello's life is the price that he must pay for his understanding of how evil operates both in himself and, by implication, in the world generally.

The tragic philosophy of *Hamlet* in which Providence, the force which governs the conduct of human affairs, is shown working ultimately for the good of mankind, is modified considerably in *Othello*. In the later play Shakespeare considers the far less optimistic possibility that 'good' is constantly at the mercy of a universal 'evil'. We observe that at the end of the play it is Othello's life which is sacrificed—the 'good' in him dies along with the 'evil' he seeks to eliminate. His suicide restores to his character a measure of human dignity, but even so, Iago remains alive to signify the permanence of 'evil' as a force in the world. Shakespeare was drawn towards this view through his treatment of the darker, less easily explicable side of human nature in the so-called 'problem plays', *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Measure For Measure*, which he wrote between 1600 and 1604. Indeed, in *Measure For Measure*, written probably just before *Othello*, the setting of the action is Venice, and the Duke Vincentio is the repository of Venetian law, working for the general good of his subjects in an atmosphere where uncontrollable sexual passion is a force to be reckoned with. It is Angelo, his deputy, to whom he entrusts the government of Venice during his contrived absence, and whose outward show of saintliness masks an inward devilish depravity, who is tested, thereby exposing a conflict between uncontrollable human passions and the Law which holds them in check. In this play the final balance, problematic though it turns out to be, is achieved in comic terms through a happy ending. In *Othello*, the focus shifts to the more sinister aspects of this human equation, developing and refining the dramatic treatment of evil itself.

The play offers us an insight into the ways in which Shakespeare refined and developed his own dramatic art. His choosing of the figure of a Moor for his hero was a stroke of brilliance. Othello's 'blackness' singles him out from the other characters in the play, but it would be quite wrong to infer from this that Shakespeare was concerned to depict some sort of crude 'racial' conflict. To the Elizabethans the figure of the Moor represented, not an ethnic but a moral type, and this

partial view is presented in the play through the derogatory comments of Roderigo, Iago, and Brabantio. To them, the Moor epitomises lust, witchcraft, and satantic evil, all characteristics which were popularly associated with this 'type'. Shakespeare draws on these prejudices, but the play in no way supports them. Othello's physical appearance—his 'blackness'—serves to depict in vivid dramatic terms a moral challenge that the apparently civilised world of Venetian law believes it has overcome. Yet Othello is also the upholder of that law, a factor which should make us suspicious of any attempt to depict him as an 'outsider'. It is through this complex character that moral order and barbarism are made to confront each other symbolically, not in terms of a racial opposition, but rather in terms of the opposed moral forces which compete for supremacy in human nature itself.

To miss this point is to fail to understand the play's dramatic idiom. Moreover, our understanding of Shakespeare's method and technique in this play helps us to understand not only those plays which preceded it, but also the tragedies which followed: *King Lear* (1605), *Macbeth* (1606), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607).

A note on the text

As a professional dramatist Shakespeare's primary concern was to write plays for performance by actors whose skills he knew well. Consequently, he seems to have shown little personal inclination or concern to oversee the publication of his plays in book form, although there is some evidence to show that publication was occasionally sanctioned by the theatre company for which he worked. Even so, nearly half the plays which comprise the First Folio of 1623 had not appeared in print at all during his lifetime, while in the case of some (*Hamlet* and *Othello*, for example) the earlier quarto texts differ significantly from their Folio counterparts. Textual bibliographers have sought to account for these differences in a variety of ways, through the investigation of the peculiar habits of the printers who printed the plays, and through seeking to trace the original manuscript source which the printer may have used.

Othello is no exception to this general tendency. It was first published in quarto in 1622, some six years after Shakespeare's death, and eighteen years after its first appearance at the Globe. This text differs in some important details from that of the First Folio text which appeared a year later in 1623. Some critics have rejected the quarto text of 1622 as a corrupt version of the play, while others see it as the text which Shakespeare may have revised some time after its initial composition. It is argued that this revision, which adds a further 150 lines to the play, is the First Folio text of 1623.

Part 3

 Commentary

Othello is a play about deception and revenge, and to this extent it shares certain similarities with the tragedy which immediately precedes it, *Hamlet*. In the earlier play the hero, envious of 'that man/That is not passion's slave,' (III.2.68-9), learns to control his passion and moves towards a rational outlook which will enable him to revenge the death of his father. Othello, however, is persuaded by Iago to *relinquish* his control of passion (and along with it his 'honour' and powers of rational judgement) in order to revenge a wrong which has not actually been committed.

There are one or two further distinctions to be made between the two plays. At the level of plot, the dramatic conflict in *Hamlet* is between the 'mighty opposites' Hamlet and Claudius, each seeking to outwit the other, and thereby initiating actions which comprise the structure of the play. By contrast in *Othello*, the entire plot, and its conduct, are in the hands of the villain Iago. His intricate plans which involve the duping of Roderigo, the 'poisoning' of Brabantio's mind, the discrediting of Cassio, and finally the deaths of Desdemona and Othello, are all directed towards the destruction of the hero himself. Othello's compliance with Iago's plots is undertaken without his knowledge of their true objective, and to some extent this lessens the burden of responsibility which we feel he should bear. That he does finally assume that responsibility elevates him to the status of tragic hero.

Themes

The major themes in *Othello*, the various connecting ideas which give unity to the dramatic action, are bold and striking. The critic A.C. Bradley, in his book *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), has observed that the atmosphere of the play resembles that of 'a close-shut murderous room', indicating the sheer intensity of the action. Indeed, the most cursory reading of the play reveals an absence of direct concern with the wider issues of 'kingship' or 'the Elizabethan world picture' in the sense that we encounter them in the history plays, or in either *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. Even though Othello murders Desdemona at night (darkness being a pervasive feature of the play), his action fails to arouse a response from Nature in the way that, say, Macbeth's murder of King Duncan does:

Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe
Should yawn at alteration.

(V.2.100-2)

It is as though Nature's refusal to respond serves to underline the supreme tragic irony of Othello's position at this point since the 'cause' to which he has dedicated himself, and which he discusses at the opening of the final scene of the play (V.2.1-6) has no basis in reality whatever. He has been persuaded into believing that all women are false, and that Desdemona's physical appearance is evidence of her duplicity. What follows is based upon Othello's acceptance of these two dubious assumptions.

Throughout the play we are aware of the discrepancy between what particular characters appear to be, and what they are. This conflict between 'appearance' and 'reality', so pervasive in Shakespeare's plays generally, opens out in *Othello* into the wider moral perspective of the conflict between 'good' and 'evil', in which nearly all the central characters, with the notable exception of Iago, are unwittingly caught up. It is Iago who provides the key to this intense and elemental conflict, and his frank admission to the foolish Roderigo in the opening scene of the play serves as a principle which guides the action towards its tragic conclusion:

For when my outward action does demonstrate
The native act, and figure of my heart,
In complement extern, 'tis not long after,
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For doves to peck at: I am not what I am.

(I.1.61-5)

This conflict of appearance and reality which the play keeps before us, extends also, in an unusual way, to Othello himself. Ironically, up to the point where Iago persuades him otherwise (III.3.205ff.) he assumes that outward appearance and action is a clear reflection of human personality. When counselled by Iago to hide himself from Brabantio's anger, Othello responds with:

Not I, I must be found:
My parts, my title, and my perfect soul,
Shall manifest me rightly:

(I.2.30-2)

Later, though by this time a little less certain, he asserts: 'Certain, men should be what they seem.' (III.3.130-2). But, throughout, Othello's own *appearance* raises some doubts about the validity of this assumption.

tion. His 'perfect soul' is not openly reflected in his face which is, of course, black. As if to lend support to this anomaly, Iago's evil is not reflected in the 'honesty' of his face. By direct contrast, Desdemona is both 'perfect' in her soul, and 'fair' in her outward appearance. When asked about her marriage to Othello, her reasons echo the general principle which he has already declared; her perception of the qualities of Othello's mind informs her sense of his visual appearance:

I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honours, and his valiant parts
Do I my soul and fortunes consecrate:
(I.3.252-4)

Of course, Iago is aware of the weak foundation of this principle, especially since Othello is the literal *embodiment* of its possible contradictions. And it is this distinction between appearance and reality which he uses to suggest that there is some substance in the allegation that Desdemona is false.

As Othello becomes more suspicious, so he begins to lose the self-possession which was a feature of his behaviour in Act I. When he finds that others may not be what they seem, he begins to reflect on his own deficiencies, and as he does so he becomes more aware of his own physical appearance:

Haply for I am black,
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declin'd
Into the vale of years—
(III.3.267-70)

Later he seeks to give his own 'blackness' an emblematic value, as a physical reflection of what he believes is his sullied reputation: 'my name, that was as fresh/As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black/As mine own face:' (III.3.392-4). This is an attempt to find a measure of consistency amid contradictions. So conscious is Othello of the gulf between appearance and reality that he laments the passage of old customs, and their replacement with others which cannot guarantee certainty; as he takes Desdemona's hand he observes: 'the hearts of old gave hands,/But our new heraldry is hands not hearts.' (III.4.42-3). This leads finally to his own analysis of the contradictions which he believes she embodies: 'O thou black weed, why art so lovely fair?' (IV.2.69).

Othello's analysis, however, is not allowed to stand alone. Desdemona does not embody these contradictions, nor is she concerned to draw meaning from Othello's own physical appearance. For her, his 'blackness' is of no significance at all, since she sees his 'visage in his mind' (I.3.252) and holds this view consistently throughout the play. For

Emilia, who enters and sees Desdemona lying dead, Othello's 'blackness' is an outward sign of the devilish nature of his action: 'O the more angel she,/And you the blacker devil!' (V.2.131-2). Finally, for us, and for the play as a whole, Othello's 'blackness' carries yet another, perhaps more complex meaning. He is the tragic hero of the play, and black, the colour which Elizabethans normally associated with stage tragedy, is therefore a fitting symbol of his status. Thus, at the heart of the play lies an intricate and vividly dramatic emblem, the meaning of which changes as the action moves forward. At the outset the epithets 'Noble Moor' and 'black devil' vie with each other for supremacy, as we try to evaluate Othello's character. They give way in the middle of the play to his own view of himself as a cuckold (he sees himself at IV.2.75ff., in a striking image, as Vulcan, the blacksmith of the Gods, whose wife Venus committed adultery with Mars), but culminates finally in his establishment as tragic hero taking full responsibility for his mistaken action, and combining these opposites in a new and impressive dramatic unity. Thus, the play ends with a restoration of continuity, achieved at the expense of Desdemona's and Othello's deaths, in which appearance and reality can now be openly distinguished from each other.

Setting

The action is divided between Venice and Cyprus, and moves from the centre of civilised behaviour in Act I, to the hostile environment of Cyprus for the remainder of the play, where the marriage of Desdemona and Othello will be tested. In this respect, the play resembles one of the earlier comedies, *As You Like It* (1598-9) in which the action moves from the Court (whose values differ somewhat from those of Venice in *Othello*) to the Forest of Arden where the characters undergo a series of rigorous tests of their ideas and beliefs. In Shakespeare's plays generally particular locations are usually endowed with symbolic meaning, especially when we remember that on the Elizabethan stage the absence of scenery suggests that dramatists were not concerned to reproduce the physical characteristics of a particular place for their own sake. Bearing this in mind, what values do Venice and Cyprus represent in the play, and what do they contribute to our understanding of the central dramatic conflict? Let us look firstly at Venice.

When Iago and Roderigo waken Brabantio in the opening scene of the play, he responds in the following manner:

What, tell'st thou me of robbing? this is Venice,
My house is not a grange.

(I.1.105-6)

Brabantio's surprise indicates that robbery and law-breaking in Venice

are unusual. Even after having established to his limited satisfaction that Iago's and Roderigo's story has some truth in it, he goes to confront Othello with the Venetian law: 'To prison, till fit time/Of law; and course of direct session,/Call thee to answer.' (I.2.85-7). In the scene which follows this confrontation we observe the workings of Venetian law at two levels. Firstly, the Duke of Venice, in whose authority the law is vested, has to deal with an external threat to the stability and peace of Venice. But he methodically gathers evidence from his advisers, weighs different possibilities, and only sanctions action when he is certain of the direction in which the enemy fleet is travelling. Secondly, he deals with the internal problem of Brabantio's intemperate accusations, but he uses the same method, allowing both Othello and Desdemona to speak before deciding on a course of action. That the Duke is persuaded by Othello's story is vital in establishing the hero's worth according to the standards of Venice:

If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.
(I.3.289-90)

But Shakespeare deliberately introduces a certain precariousness into the situation since he wishes to demonstrate how, in particular circumstances, these standards can be made vulnerable to attack. In Venice, at any rate, the more cynical view of human nature which Iago and Roderigo express, and to which Brabantio, and later Othello, fall prey, is held firmly in check by the judicious judgement of the Duke. It is upon this foundation that Othello's 'reputation' rests, a point which receives an unexpectedly dramatic emphasis later in the play when the shocked ambassador, Lodovico, watches him abuse his wife in public:

Is this the noble Moor, whom our full senate
Call all in all sufficient? This the noble nature,
Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue
The shot of accident, nor dart of chance,
Could neither graze nor pierce?
(IV.1.260-4)

It is in Cyprus, at the very point where Venetian and 'Turk' meet, that the standards established in the opening act of the play are to be tested. The precarious Venetian hold on Cyprus reflects a psychological battle waged in and around the character of Othello himself, as Iago begins to undermine his authority and judgement. The stormy uncertainty of Desdemona's and Othello's arrival in Cyprus, and the tenuous victory over the Turkish fleet (which in strict terms is not exactly a victory), lends atmosphere to the moral uncertainties to come. The tension is maintained since Cyprus is in a state of military readiness, in need of

defence, and demanding alertness and judgement from its defenders.

The first major weakness in the Venetian defence (which is, of course, the prologue to the exposure of a more serious weakness) occurs when the drunken Cassio forgets himself and threatens the security of the citadel. His violation of the standards of 'courtesy' and 'duty' expected of him is recognised by Othello himself, who places Cassio's indiscretion in a larger, more prophetic context:

Are we turn'd Turks, and to ourselves do that
Which heaven has forbid to Ottomites?
For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl;
(II.3.161-3)

This disturbance not only threatens the safety of the town: 'What, in a town of war,/Yet wild, the people's hearts brim full of fear,' (II.3.204-5), but it also challenges Othello's own self-control: 'Now by heaven/My blood begins my safer guides to rule,' (II.3.195-6). This precarious psychological balance, reflecting as it does, the equilibrium which was maintained in Venice, is exactly what Iago intends to upset. Thus, what is respectable in Venice, loses its respectability in Cyprus; the virtuous Desdemona is transformed into a common Venetian housewife who, according to Iago, habitually deceives her husband:

I know our country disposition well;
In Venice they do let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands: their best conscience
Is not to leave undone, but keep unknown.
(III.3.205-8)

Cassio's loss of self-control, directly attributable to the drink foisted upon him by Iago, has an important parallel to Othello's relinquishment of his 'safer guides', as he falls prey to a feeling of suspicion which has its origin in the same source. The issues which the brawl raises reappear, in a slightly different guise at the end of the play, at the point where the now fallen Othello fights with himself to reassert control:

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduc'd the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog
And smote him thus.
(V.2.352-6)

The psychological conflict which he acts out at the end of the play is reflected in the conflict between Venice and Cyprus, the Venetian and the Turk, civilisation and barbarity, which is central to the action and meaning of the play.

Character and characterisation

We have already observed the intensity of Shakespeare's dramatic vision in *Othello*, and some of the ways in which the central psychological conflict is given wider scope and meaning. It is not surprising, given Shakespeare's impressive grasp of the complexities of human affairs, that the characters he draws should engage our attention as full individuals, of the kind that we sometimes find in novels. On the other hand, to react too strongly against this, as critics sometimes do, and to view particular characters as moral 'types', for example Desdemona as 'good', or Iago as 'evil', is to fail to give full credit to Shakespeare's considerable powers of dramatic characterisation. Desdemona is 'divine', but she has married without her father's consent, and she is, as her name suggests, 'ill-fated'; similarly, although Bianca's name means 'white', she is considered by Iago and Emilia to be a prostitute. Clearly, the general question of characterisation in Shakespeare's plays is fraught with dangers which admit of no easy solution. Perhaps one way of unlocking the full dramatic ambiguity of Shakespeare's characters is to consider their individuality in relation to their function as contributors to the action which the playwright seeks to present. Thus, while it would be wrong to see them purely as 'devices', moral or otherwise which the dramatist uses as part of his overall technique, it would be equally wrong to think of them as 'people' in the everyday sense of the term. To press beyond the limits which the play lays down, is to risk isolating the characters from the carefully integrated structure which gives them life and meaning. Bearing this significant, but difficult reservation in mind, let us now look more closely at the characters themselves.

Othello

Othello is, perhaps, one of Shakespeare's most unusual tragic heroes, a combination of opposites in that he is a 'black' man with a 'perfect soul'. Central to his character then, is what we might call an inversion of the relationship between body and soul. So long as his 'perfect soul' rules his actions, then he is the 'noble Moor', but once he falls victim to his passions, then the relationship between the two is reversed. Information about his character comes to us from a variety of sources in the play; for example he gives information about himself, and others provide details about him, although in all cases we should treat carefully both the sources and the contexts of these remarks. The information which others give about him is of two kinds, positive and negative. We should note that Othello does not appear onstage until the second scene of the play, but even before he does, a sustained attack has already

been mounted on his character by Iago and Roderigo. In their view he is proud, self-opinionated, bombastic in his utterance, and a bad judge of others:

But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,
Evades them with a bombast circumstance,
Horribly stuff'd with epithets of war:
(I.1.12-14)

In the opening scene he is variously referred to as 'the Moor' (I.1.40), 'the thicklips' (I.1.66), 'an old black ram' (I.1.88), and finally, 'the devil' (I.1.91). Some critics take the view that Shakespeare may have sought to mobilise the prejudices against 'Moors' that his audience may have shared, at this early point in the play. This is not easy to determine. What we can say, however, is that both Iago and Roderigo, the one having failed to get the lieutenantship that Cassio now holds, and the other having failed to secure Desdemona for himself, are hardly impartial observers. Even when Othello appears, giving us the chance to judge him against this reductive evaluation, the only firm evidence which emerges is that of our eyes (the kind of evidence to which Brabantio, and later he himself, will succumb).

Set against this clearly derogatory view, is that of the Duke of Venice, who holds Othello in high regard, appraising his virtues and entrusting him with the governorship of Cyprus. Desdemona's testimony is also important in that her evaluation of Othello eschews his physical appearance in favour of the qualities of his mind. Montano, the former governor of Cyprus admires him: 'the man commands/Like a full soldier:' (II.1.35-6), and added to that is Cassio's admiring remark after Othello's death that he was 'great of heart' (V.2.362). There is one other, rather curious piece of information which comes from Iago, and which we might therefore expect to be derogatory, but which points ironically towards a strength of character which Othello shares with Cassio, Lodovico, and even Brabantio, and which Iago himself proposes to exploit:

The Moor a free and open nature too,
That thinks men honest that but seems to be so:
And will as tenderly be led by the nose . . .
As asses are.
(I.3.397-400)

Some critics have, of course, sought to demonstrate that from the outset Iago's opinion of Othello is right, but whatever view we accept, we should follow the example of the Duke of Venice and weigh carefully *all* of the evidence at our disposal.

In addition to what others say of him, Othello tells us a lot about

himself. Compared with Iago's earthy and reductive language, his is, indeed, elevated—he almost always speaks in verse—but in the early stages of the play it could hardly be described as 'bombastic'. Rather, his language is open and direct, dignified and yet courteous, revealing a modesty which at times borders almost on self-effacement: 'Rude am I in my speech, / And little blest with the set phrase of peace,' (I.3.81-2). His long description of his courtship of Desdemona, which he says himself will be 'a round unvarnish'd tale' (I.3.90), hardly corroborates the insinuation in Roderigo's earlier claim that he is 'an extravagant and wheeling stranger, / Of here, and everywhere' (I.1.136-7), nor indeed Iago's later description of him as an 'erring barbarian' (I.3.356-7), and as if to underline this, the Duke himself comments on the efficacy of Othello's story (I.3.171). We also learn from Othello that his love for Desdemona represents a principle of 'order', and he gives us no reason to doubt its propriety. Generally, the Othello of the first two acts is a character of impressive dignity and presence, well able to command, and possessing the kind of charisma which diverts our attention from the ambiguous circumstances of his marriage (about which we hear no definitive account). But as he succumbs to the passion of jealousy, based as it is upon suspicion, his rational powers are so perverted that his own view of himself changes. His black face becomes a badge or emblem of his sullied reputation, as Shakespeare now sets out to explore the full dramatic ambiguity of the soul/body paradox which we observed earlier. What in I.3.81-2, seemed to be the product of modesty and courtesy, Othello now views as a deficiency (see III.3.267-70).

His blackness, the deficiencies of his speech, and a debilitating sense of his own age, now replace our earlier positive view of him. During the middle part of the play, after Iago has begun to work on him (III.3) what Othello says about himself should be treated with extreme caution, since we know that he is deluded. Lodovico reminds us (IV.1.260-4) of his former 'noble nature', and 'solid virtue', as a way of keeping before us the Othello of the first two acts of the play, but it is not until after the murder of Desdemona, when the truth begins to emerge, that the pendulum begins to swing back. Horrified though we are at the extravagance of Othello's reactions to Iago's insinuations, (here, if anywhere, the charge of 'bombast' is well-founded) his attempts to justify Desdemona's murder arouse in us a measure of sympathy, partly because we have been privileged to see how it has come about. Though we can hardly excuse Othello's behaviour, we can sympathise with his claim that he is:

An honourable murderer if you will:
For nought did I in hate, but all in honour.
(V.2.295-6)

Though not entirely to blame, he does assume full responsibility for his action as he proceeds to exact from himself the terrible penalty that he now realises he has wrongfully imposed upon Desdemona. His final speech, measured and dignified, recaptures the modesty and directness of his earlier utterances. Moreover, his enactment of a part of his personal history, upon which his claim to nobility rests, contributes to our sense of him as a tragic hero, torn violently between opposed viewpoints, and reconciling them only at the cost of his own life.

Desdemona

Desdemona is altogether more simply drawn. She does embody the principle of 'good' in the play, but Shakespeare takes care to provide her with certain human touches which fill out her character. She is probably younger than Othello, although Brabantio's early references to her as 'O unhappy girl' (I.1.163), and 'a maid, so tender, fair, and happy,' (I.2.66) do not indicate that she is less than adult.

Despite Iago's insinuations, and Othello's later attacks upon her, she remains the most consistent character in the play, although the ambiguous circumstances of her marriage do open her actions to the possibility of misinterpretation. Brabantio initially thinks of her as a victim of Othello's magic charms: 'Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her,' (I.2.63), and, of course, Iago sees her simply as a passive animal, dominated by a more forceful one: 'an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe;' (I.1.88-9). But when Desdemona does appear to speak for herself, we are immediately aware of a woman, mature in judgement, perceptive, and in full control of her faculties. She outlines her 'duty' both to her father and to her husband (I.3.180-9), and she is clear and positive about her reasons for having decided to marry Othello. We are impressed too by the faith she inspires in her husband, who responds to Brabantio's churlish allegation that she may be more deceitful than Othello realises, with the comment: 'My life upon her faith:' (I.3.294). We should note in passing that this line, completed with the addition 'honest Iago', also points forward to the fate which awaits both her and Othello, since it will be hers and her husband's faith that Iago will undermine. But at this point in the play we cannot fail to admire the clearness and honesty of Desdemona's character.

As with Othello, there are two viewpoints to consider. The public demonstration of Desdemona's virtues is balanced by a more covert undermining of them as Iago undertakes to instruct Roderigo in what he claims are the habits of Venetian women. (He does the same later to Othello). Desdemona's love is reduced to 'merely a lust of the blood, and a permission of the will.' (I.3.335-6), and therefore cannot last: 'When she is satiated with his (Othello's) body, she will find the error of

her choice;' (I.3.351-2). Throughout, and particularly in Acts III and IV, Iago emphasises the discrepancy (as he formulates it) between Desdemona's physical beauty, and the corruptness of her soul, and he seeks to persuade Othello that the deceit she practises is somehow typical.

When Iago advances this kind of argument to Desdemona herself, she rejects it as a collection of 'old paradoxes, to make fools laugh i' the alehouse;' (II.138-9), just as she responds later to Emilia's awareness of the sordid ways of the world: 'Beshrew me, if I would do such a wrong,/For the whole world.' (IV.3.77-8). It could be argued that Desdemona's innocence is simply too good to be true, a naivety which has no place in either Cyprus or Venice. But we must remember that more than any other character in the play, she has a thorough knowledge of 'goodness', although Shakespeare takes pains to make it plausibly human in its appearance. For example, her elopement we have already mentioned, but notice the concern as she waits for Othello's arrival in Cyprus, particularly when she tries to disguise her own anxiousness:

I am not merry, but I do beguile
The thing I am, by seeming otherwise.
(II.1.122-3)

Of course, like her elopement, this comment has a sinister ring to it, and it helps to make Othello's own fall more plausible, but at this point it enables us to engage with the thoughts and feelings of Desdemona as a caring human being, as well as savour the irony of her position. Similarly, later, in a scene of considerable tension and foreboding, we become aware, through her singing of the 'willow' song, of the intensity of her feelings. Here, if anywhere, Desdemona's view of the world could change, since her confidence in human relationships has been shattered, but even after the discussion with Emilia, and her questions about human behaviour, her prayers are finally directed towards eliminating evil, rather than participating in it:

Good night, good night: God me such usage send
Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!
(IV.3.104-5)

There is a sense in which Desdemona is intrinsically incorruptible, although her doubts go some way towards humanising her character. Also, her actions are shown to be extremely vulnerable. Iago illustrates this in his conversation with Cassio just before the lieutenant falls from favour, but the latter continues to assert Desdemona's qualities in the face of a cynical attempt to undermine them. For Cassio she remains 'a most exquisite lady.' (II.3.18), 'a most fresh and delicate creature'

(II.3.20), whose speech is the model of 'perfection' (II.3.25). But to one already corrupted, these claims have no force, and hence she is made to seem naive in her subsequent pleading for Cassio.

There is, of course, a sense in which all 'good' in the play seems naive in the face of Iago's cynical and reductive outlook. The point is that Desdemona's openness is made to seem factless, and in a curious way, childish, in a situation in which it is a quality no longer to be valued. She preserves her integrity for us with her request to Cassio to 'Stay and hear me speak'. (III.3.31), and even her excuse for not being able to produce her handkerchief (III.4.81) cannot except in a reduced context, be considered as deceit. These are all examples of Shakespeare's ability to individualise her character, while at the same time not losing sight of the values she represents within the wider framework of the play. In a number of ways Desdemona is a yardstick by which we can measure the extent of Othello's transformation. From a language they both share in the early part of the play, (Iago says privately: 'O, you are well tun'd now' II.1.199), Othello sinks to a position where Desdemona can no longer understand him: 'I understand a fury in your words/ But not the words.' (IV.2.32-3). Perhaps the final evidence for her consistent devotion comes when, at the point of death, she takes full blame for Othello's action: 'Nobody, I myself, farewell.' (V.2.125).

Iago

Iago is probably the most sophisticated of a long line of Shakespearean villains, and he shares certain characteristics with Richard III in the early tragedy of *Richard III* (1593), Don John, in the comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* (1599), and Claudius in *Hamlet* (1601). Many attempts have been made to account for Iago's evil disposition, and he, himself, adduces a number of motives for his destruction of Othello. The Romantic poet, Samuel Coleridge, concluded that Iago was the embodiment of a 'motiveless malignity for which there need be no explanation, although later critics, such as William Empson in *The Structure of Complex Words*, have sought to vindicate his character from this criticism by drawing attention to his 'realistic' approach to human experience. Whatever the truth of the matter, it seems clear that Shakespeare sought to create more than simply an embodiment of evil, designed merely as a counterbalance to the moral values attributed to Desdemona. Iago's lies are plausible, and there is a grain of truth in his evaluation of experience, but he fools everybody, and his lies are, nonetheless, lies.

Iago is unquestionably evil, but Shakespeare complicates the picture by attributing to him a series of motives for wanting to destroy Othello. But, as with all the other characters in the play, we have to observe

carefully the circumstances in which these explanations are advanced, since if we absolve Iago from blame, then we run the risk of devaluing the stature of the tragic hero himself, and of dismissing the entire action as improbable.

The first motive that Iago advances for his disloyalty to Othello concerns his failure to obtain the post of lieutenant which has gone to Cassio. Iago is confident of his own abilities: 'I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.' (I.1.11), but he disparages ruthlessly the abilities and integrity of others. It would appear, then, that Iago is envious of Cassio: 'He has a daily beauty in his life,/That makes me ugly:' (V.1.19-20), but he is equally scathing in his comments upon Othello's judgement, for having preferred the comparatively inexperienced Cassio to himself: 'And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof,' (I.1.28). Iago hardly ever advances one motive at a time for his actions; Cassio may have a 'daily beauty in his life' but he may also tell Othello of Iago's plans, therefore he must be killed. Similarly, whatever he says to Roderigo, his main objective is to persuade the latter to continue paying him money.

Throughout, Iago's motives revolve around the twin poles of greed and envy. In his soliloquy at the end of Act I, his motive for hating Othello is surprisingly inadequate:

I hate the Moor,
And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets
He's done my office; I know not if't be true . . .
Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do, as if for surety:

(I.3.384-8)

Later in the play Emilia reminds us of this allegation, and links it with the consistently cynical viewpoint that Iago advances, as she tries to guess who might be responsible for Othello's transformation: 'Some such squire he was,/That turn'd your wit the seamy side without,/And made you suspect me with the Moor.' (IV.2.147-9). It is the same outlook which prompts him to surmise that Cassio is in love with Desdemona: 'That Cassio loves her, I do well believe it;' (II.1.281), and moreover to admit as part of his motive for revenge, his own love for her: 'now I do love her too,/Not out of absolute lust . . . But partly led to diet my revenge,' (II.1.286-9). Evidently, from Emilia's point of view, Iago's cynicism amounts to a disposition of character for which there appears to be no clear reason. Cassio too observes this outspoken frankness in Iago, which he mistakes for 'honesty', and suggests that this is because he is a soldier: 'He speaks home, madam, you may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar'. (II.1.165-6). And yet we notice that even Cassio is not free from the suspicion of having seduced Iago's wife:

'For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too;' (II.1.302). From these motives we may deduce that Iago's aim is to corrupt. Othello is of 'a constant, noble, loving nature;' (II.1.284), while Desdemona's own 'goodness will make the net/That shall enmesh 'em all.' (II.3.352-3).

There is clearly a sense in which we may regard Iago as an 'individualist', relying as he does upon the power of his 'will' rather than upon any sense of morality. When Roderigo speaks of his 'virtue', he responds contemptuously with: 'Virtue? a fig! 'tis in ourselves, that we are thus,/or thus: our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners,' (I.3.319-20). He rejects outright the notion of 'fate' (a notion which Othello himself uses to account for his own fall: 'Who can control his fate?', V.2.266), and he demonstrates this rejection by controlling for the most part, the plot of the play. He loses no opportunity to lead his victims into making mistakes by preparing the ground carefully with suggestion and interpretation of event, thus depriving them of the power to make independent judgements. Iago's success depends very much upon preserving the secrecy of his designs, and his control of the plot enables him to keep his victims apart for most of the play; when they meet, then they do so only in conditions which he prescribes for them.

Iago occupies the point of view towards which Othello gradually moves. Shakespeare's provision of motives gives his villainy a plausibility which we cannot (in the same way that the characters in the play do not) examine too closely. Iago uses them occasionally as he keeps us dangling in his soliloquies. It is not, therefore, surprising that once his plots are revealed, he refuses to explain them: 'Demand me nothing, what you know, you know,/From this time forth I never will speak word.' (V.2.305-6). Perhaps all that we can really say of Iago is that he exists. In a frightened retort after Othello stabs him he observes maliciously, 'I bleed, sir, but not kill'd' (V.2.289), and even after the hero lies dead, Iago still remains, observing the tragic results of his devilish handiwork.

Roderigo

Although Roderigo is, by comparison, a minor character in the play, he fulfils a vital function in its central action; he illuminates Iago's character and method for us.

Because he is the first to be taken in by Iago's lies, he provides us with an opportunity to glimpse in advance the very means whereby Othello's downfall will be engineered. Although he is a rival for the hand of Desdemona, and continues to pursue her even after she is married, he lacks Othello's presence, yet if the latter can be 'tenderly led by the nose . . ./As asses are.' (I.3.399-400), so also can Roderigo. His lack of

awareness of the confidence which Iago places in him makes him something of a comic figure, who commands little of our sympathy. In the opening scene of the play his objections to Iago's past behaviour are easily dismissed, as he rapidly embraces both a derogatory view of Othello, and an inflated sense of the possibilities of his own success in obtaining Desdemona. His language is, perhaps, less coarse than that of Iago, but his viewpoint is identical, as he describes Desdemona's elopement as an act of covert deception:

Transported with no worse nor better guard,
But with a knave of common hire, a gondolier,
To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor:
(I.1.124-6)

He convinces Brabantio sufficiently to persuade the old man to change his opinion of him, from one of outright rejection: 'In honest plainness thou hast heard me say/My daughter is not for thee;' (I.1.97-8), to acceptance: 'On, good Roderigo, I'll deserve your pains.' (I.1.184). Roderigo then, becomes a corrupter of others, just as he has become corrupted by Iago. Whenever we encounter him in the play, his wavering resolve is being strengthened by Iago's persuasive rhetoric (which it is designed to expose), as he is cajoled into participating in the plots to discredit first Othello, and then Cassio. His reluctance to take part suggests that he is not totally devoid of moral awareness, but that he is simply too weak to assert himself. He requires considerable prompting, both before and during the course of the first plot to discredit Cassio: 'How now Roderigo, I pray you, after the lieutenant go.' (II.3.130-1), and before the attempt to murder him he admits:

I have no great devotion to the deed;
And yet he has given me satisfying reasons,
'Tis but a man gone: forth, my sword, he dies.
(V.1.8-10)

While we may criticise this reluctance, and perhaps observe the ludicrously comic dismissal of human life here, we should be wary of expecting Roderigo to do more, since the alternative, which Iago invites us to approve, is his own diabolical wilfulness. The pathetic nature of Roderigo's resistance to Iago's suggestions is as nothing compared to the revelations which follow them in the latter's soliloquies. Moreover, Roderigo's final realisation of his own villainy: 'O villain that I am!' (V.1.29) shows an awareness after the event, not unlike that of Othello, except that he never breaks free from Iago who kills him simply in order to maintain the secrecy of his plot.

Brabantio

Brabantio appears only in the first act of the play as both harrassed father and respected Venetian senator. Clearly he knows nothing about Desdemona's elopement, a factor which forces us to question its full propriety, but like Roderigo, he is easily persuaded into believing the worst, even before he has had the opportunity to test the conclusions he is offered. When told of his daughter's elopement in crudely graphic terms, he believes it, using as corroboration a 'dream' that he has had:

This accident is not unlike my dream,
Belief of it oppresses me already:
(I.1.142-3)

We should not be uncritical of this; compare, for example, Banquo's comment in *Macbeth* upon the thoughts which creep into the mind during sleep: 'Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature/Gives way to in repose!' (II.1.8-9). Thus, although Brabantio's dream is unquestionably one of foreboding, it gives us as much of a hint about his loss of mental control as it does about the allegedly evil nature of Desdemona's action. Perhaps we should link this to his swift changes of mind in relation to Roderigo. So convinced is he of the nature of his daughter's action that her unexplained absence alone forces him to conclude that it bodes evil: 'It is too true an evil, gone she is,' (I.1.160). We should contrast this easy capitulation with the Duke's careful sifting of evidence at the beginning of Act I Scene 3. When Brabantio confronts Othello, it is with accusations whose origins we recognise as being Iago, and he simply accepts as true (as does Iago), reasons which are in themselves highly speculative: 'Tis probable and palpable to thinking.' (I.2.76).

Brabantio's demise is swift, and an efficient demonstration of the potency of Iago's 'poison':

And though he in a fertile climate dwell,
Plague him with flies: though that his joy be joy,
Yet throw such changes of vexation on't,
As it may lose some colour.
(I.1.70-3)

But the victim of this method is sharply at odds with the view of him which emerges from what the Duke of Venice himself says of his qualities. In the Venetian senate he is 'gentle signior,' (I.3.50) and 'Good Brabantio,' (I.3.172) whose counsel and advice are genuinely prized: 'We lack'd your counsel and your help tonight.' (I.3.51). Moreover, the contradictions multiply as Othello himself reveals that Brabantio had

actually encouraged his visits, and was as captivated by his stories as Desdemona had been:

Her father lov'd me, oft invited me,
Still question'd me the story of my life
From year to year;

(I.3.128-30)

The view of another, less hostile Brabantio emerges when the Duke, after having heard and weighed the evidence, says to him: 'Let me speak like yourself, and lay a sentence, / Which as a guise or step may help these lovers / Into your favour.' (I.3.199-200). But the now transformed Brabantio whose feelings of certainty have already fallen victim to Iago's ruthless method, perceives only the equivocal meaning of what the Duke says, and resolves to sustain his discontent in the face of every attempt to appease his condition:

I never yet did hear
That the bruised heart was pierced through the ear:
(I.3.219-20)

This failure to respond foreshadows Othello's own refusal to admit the validity of what Desdemona later says in her own defence, and it is ironic that Brabantio's own observation of her deception should later be taken up and used as evidence against her both by Iago and Othello himself. When at the end of the play Gratiano reveals that the marriage of Desdemona to Othello was 'mortal' to Brabantio, (V.2.206), we are tempted to conclude that here is yet another of Iago's victims, whose 'joy' has been perverted into a deadly hate.

Cassio

We have already seen how Othello, Roderigo, and Brabantio are duped by Iago. Cassio is the fourth character to fall victim, but unlike the other three, he is still alive at the end of the play, and takes over the governorship of Cyprus from Othello. Ironically, after having been accused of 'replacing' Othello in Desdemona's affections, he does replace him in another capacity, and one which gives the lie finally to Iago's objections to him. It is Cassio's apparent inexperience that arouses Iago's initial jealousy; he has never, so it is claimed, fought a battle, and 'mere prattle without practice / is all his soldiership.' (I.1.26-7). The denigration of Cassio is as extreme as that of Othello himself. When the young lieutenant first appears, it is as an emissary of the Venetian senate, but we notice immediately that he and Iago do not have the same outlook at all. The latter's cynical account of Othello's marriage is met with incomprehension from Cassio:

IAGO: Faith, he tonight hath boarded a land carrack:
If it prove lawful prize, he's made for ever.
CASSIO: I do not understand.
IAGO: He's married.

(I.1.50-2)

This is the first of a number of occasions on which Cassio refuses to accept Iago's crude analysis of events (see also II.3.15-25), and we notice that throughout he is generous in his dealings with others. Cassio, nonetheless, is vulnerable, and paradoxically because of his strengths as much as of his weaknesses. Iago claims from the outset that he is 'A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife,' (I.1.21) whose physical attractiveness is 'To be suspected, fram'd to make women false:' (I.3.396). Cassio is courteous, but the gestures with which he welcomes both Desdemona and Emilia to Cyprus will be construed as lecherous advances by Iago: 'Ay, smile upon her, do: I will catch you in your own courtesies.' (II.1.169-70), and will provide the 'ocular proof' of Desdemona's infidelity. The only courtesy that Cassio eschews (and we should not take this as too serious a sign of weakness), is that of drinking to excess: 'I am unfortunate in the infirmity and dare not task my weakness with any more.' (II.3.37-8). He is persuaded, Roderigo provokes him into a quarrel, and he loses his 'reputation' as well as risks the peace of the island. His demise is, of course, necessary to the plot of the play since Cassio's innocent importuning of Desdemona will ironically provide the grounds upon which suspicion of their collusion in deceit is to be founded. In addition, Cassio's drunken lack of co-ordination, though comic in its immediate effect, foreshadows Othello's more serious loss of control as he begins to fear the safety of his own 'reputation'.

But, as in the case of a number of other characters in the play, Cassio is more than simply a cardboard figure. Setting aside for a moment the question of 'time' in the play, it is puzzling that Cassio, a 'proper man' in so many respects, should consort with a character like Bianca, whom a number of the other characters think is a prostitute. If we look closely at when she first appears we find that Cassio greets her with 'my most fair Bianca?', and 'sweet love' (III.4.168-9). Moreover, we notice that the only circumstances in which they appear together on stage are those which Iago has either contrived, or can take advantage of for the purpose of his plotting. But if that is said, their relationship seems altogether more down-to-earth than that of Desdemona and Othello, hinting, but giving no real substance to the view that Cassio is a 'ladies' man'. The ambiguity of Cassio's relationship with Bianca seems therefore, deliberate. Furthermore, when we observe Bianca's pangs of jealousy at Cassio's production of Desdemona's handkerchief, his response seems to contradict flatly the view that she is a character of no consequence:

Throw your vile guesses in the devil's teeth,
From whence you have them; you are jealous now
That this is from some mistress, some remembrance.
No, by my faith Bianca.

(III.4.182-5)

If we fail to respond positively to pleas of this kind, then we run the risk of branding Cassio as a liar, which he clearly is not. On the other hand, even he himself admits to Iago that his affections are not seriously engaged: 'I marry her? what? a customer;' (IV.1.119). While there seems to be little doubt of Bianca's affection for him, Shakespeare seems also to want to indicate that Cassio is both a man of honour, and an experienced participant in more obviously worldly things. Though nothing more is heard of Bianca after the beginning of Act V, Cassio's relationship with her does not prevent him from becoming the ruler of Cyprus. When the details of Iago's plots finally emerge Cassio openly states 'Dear general, I did never give you cause.' (V.2.300), and we should weigh this defence carefully against any suggestion that he behaves improperly in relation either to Desdemona, or to Bianca.

Emilia

For much of the play, Emilia's role is a subsidiary one. Though she is the wife of Iago, she is ignorant of the real nature of his plots, and she even aids his designs without any awareness of their consequences. For example, she is asked to persuade Desdemona to plead for Cassio's reinstatement, and she gives Iago the handkerchief which will play so large a part in convincing Othello of his wife's guilt. Shakespeare portrays Emilia in a 'realistic' light, attributing to her (as with Cassio) strengths and weaknesses, combining in her character qualities of loyalty and service, with a commitment also to the more worldly side of human nature. Iago dismisses her as a typical woman, chiding, licentious, and deceitful, but she responds firmly to his criticism with a statement which echoes throughout the remainder of the play: 'You ha' little cause to say so.' (II.1.108). Emilia tolerates her husband's cynicism and recognises it for what it is, but she does not suspect Iago of outright evil. Also, she observes and comments upon the generalised patterns of human behaviour against which the relationship of Othello and Desdemona might, as it changes, be measured:

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man:
They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;
They eat us hungrily, and when they are full
They belch us.

(III.4.100-3)

She is obviously more realistic in her appraisal of human nature than Desdemona in that she sees both its positive and negative aspects, and her approach to life in general is a pragmatic one. Even so, and despite the fact that she can offer an insincere argument for overthrowing moral standards (see IV.3.70-103), she is in no doubt about the distinctions between good and evil, and can recognise them. Perhaps Bianca's response to the accusation of 'strumpet' that Emilia levels against her, provides us with as concise an evaluation of Emilia's character as we could wish for:

I am no strumpet, but of life as honest
As you that thus abuse me. (V.1.121-2)

Emilia is, therefore, particularly qualified to analyse the moral nature of Othello's murder of Desdemona. Moreover, she represents a crucial link in the chain whereby Iago's villainy will be finally exposed. It is Emilia who makes public the fact of Desdemona's death in a way which breaks Iago's hold on the action. It is ironical, nonetheless, that she has to relinquish the loyalty which Iago has hitherto traded upon: 'Tis proper I obey him, but not now.' (V.2.197), but her continued insistence that she should be allowed to speak makes her instrumental in restoring to language a new propriety. Moreover, the revelation of Iago's villainy, which surprises her, places her in an almost identical position to Desdemona as the forsaken mistress, and she reinforces the comparison with her recalling of the 'willow' song after Iago has stabbed her. Desdemona's 'A guiltless death I die.' (V.2.123) is balanced by the equally truthful nature of Emilia's dying statement, which re-unites the acts of 'speaking' and 'thinking' which Iago has striven to separate throughout:

So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true;
So speaking as I think, I die. I die. (V.2.251-2)

The language of 'Othello'

The Elizabethan stage contained no scenery, and so the burden of expounding the action rested firmly upon the dramatist's and actor's combined powers to evoke a sense of place, and atmosphere, through language. *Othello* employs these resources to the full, both in terms of the play's theme (as Emilia's final comment illustrates), and at a more fundamental technical level. Critics have always been aware of the 'poetry' of *Othello*, of the intensity and pressure of its figurative language, but this should not blind us to the wide variety of expression that the play employs, ranging from the formal and magnificent utterances of the hero himself, to a more flexible and natural language, not far removed from that of everyday speech. We should however, guard

against falling into the trap of thinking that Shakespeare's purpose was to imitate the language of everyday life, or indeed, that Elizabethans spoke in blank verse. The variations in style fulfil a dramatic purpose, and we should see them as part of the wider formal structure of the play.

The basic metre which Shakespeare uses is the iambic pentameter, a combination of five strong, and five weakly stressed syllables distributed alternately throughout a single line. But as Shakespeare's own style developed, so the metrical patterns of his blank verse became more flexible, as he sought to reflect more complex states of mind in his characters. In a play like *Othello*, in which formal order is attacked and destroyed, we might reasonably expect to find some attempt to reflect this in the structure of the play's language. How this works can be discovered in the opening scene of the play, in Brabantio's speech after he has realised that Desdemona is missing. Brabantio begins with a positive, measured conclusion, and the ominous evenness of its tone is dogmatic in its certainty and seemingly firm in its grasp of the thought of what the future holds:

u / u / u / u / u /
 It is too true an evil, gone she is,
 u / u / u / u / u /
 And what's to come of my despised time
 u / u / u /
 Is nought but bitterness. (I.1.160-2)

These lines, however, contain an additional tension in that we already know that his 'truth' is fabricated and cannot therefore be established so simply or so certainly. But we also observe that what begins as formal blank verse disintegrates rapidly into fragmented prose as Brabantio's language begins to register his own mental confusion. The breakdown begins with his 'Now Roderigo,' (I.1.162), correcting itself momentarily in the following line although the parenthesis reinforces the sense of a mind gradually losing control:

u / u / u / u / u /
 Where didst thou see her? (O unhappy girl!) (I.1.163)

It culminates in an extremely awkward verse bordering on prose in its variegated rhythms:

How didst thou know 'twas she? (O thou deceivest me
 Past thought!) What said she to you? Get more tapers,
 Raise all my kindred, are they married, think you? (I.1.165-7)

Brabantio's language conveys here the sense of a mind wrestling to exert control over itself, but failing to do so, as rhythm and metre begin to collide with each other.

Throughout the play we observe a tension between the formal order of public expression, varied though its rhythms often are, and the prospect of mental chaos which lies just beneath the surface of the language. What happens in Brabantio's speech operates on a much larger scale in Othello's language as the 'harmony' of his utterance is 'untuned'. Brabantio's speech descends to prose, the idiom of Iago, just as the rhythm and order of Othello's language is destroyed when he contemplates the adultery of Desdemona and Cassio:

Lie with her, lie on her?—We say lie on her, when
 they belie her.—lie with her, zounds, that's fulsome!
 Handkerchief—confessions—handkerchief! To confess . . .

Pish! Noses, ears and lips. Is't possible? Confess?
 —Handkerchief?—O devil! (He falls down) (IV.1.35-43)

The mental turmoil here is a far cry from the ordered speech of Othello's defence of his marriage (I.3.76-94), or indeed from the nervous hold on formal expression that he manages to re-assert in his final speech in the play (V.2.339-57).

More difficult in *Othello*, however, are those occasions where despite its formality, there appears to be some sort of gulf between utterance and meaning. Often the Duke's 'sentences' (I.3.199-209), which comprise a series of rhymed couplets in iambic pentameter form, are considered so formal as to reflect some uneasiness on his part at the domestic problem he has had to solve. Here the question of 'tone' is important, and those who are critical of Othello's action and character at this point in the play will, doubtless, interpret the Duke's speech in this way. But the context of his remarks (which Brabantio himself perverts in his equally formal reply), suggests that he is imparting a form of wisdom which he feels that a more temperate Brabantio might have done just as well. An equally difficult example occurs later in the play when Othello, after having been convinced by Iago's lies, swears to exact vengeance upon Desdemona. Here the formal delivery of the lines is used to emphasise the nature of Othello's mistake as we see him squandering his dignity in a series of empty gestures. Because we are aware of the mistake he is making, we are in a position to appreciate the parody of order which the rhythm of these lines reflect:

Now do I see 'tis true; look here Iago,
 All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven, . . .
 'Tis gone.
 Arise, black vengeance from thy hollow cell, (III.3.451-4)

This is a very different Othello from the 'noble' hero of the first two acts of the play.

The gesture which Othello makes in this speech raises the much more complex question of precisely how language and gesture are deployed throughout the play. We have already observed the conflict between 'appearance' and 'reality', and the paradoxes to which it leads. We must now observe carefully what each character understands from the words and gestures of another. For example, Iago's 'stops' which Othello mistakes for indications of his reluctance to utter an unpalatable truth, are really being used as ways of supporting his villainous argument. Othello recognises the devices, and their potential evil, but he does not associate them with 'honest' Iago:

For such things in a false disloyal knave
Are tricks of custom; but in a man that's just,
They are close denotements, working from the heart,
That passion cannot rule.

(III.3.125-8)

Similarly in a scene which Iago engineers to give Othello 'ocular proof' of Desdemona's guilt, the victim 'must conster/Poor Cassio's smiles, gestures, and light behaviour./Quite in the wrong,' (IV.1.101-3). We might contrast Iago's gestures with those of Othello who is unaware of what they signify, and whose own 'stops', as we have seen, reflect a genuine mental turmoil. Also, again by way of contrast to Iago, we might notice Emilia's questioning repetitions of the word 'husband' in V.2.141-55, which convey a genuine sense of shock at the truth which is only now beginning to emerge. Iago's 'echoing' of Othello's words earlier (III.3.105ff.) are, we know, for a very different purpose. We shall find many examples in the play of the way in which Shakespeare seeks to convey different levels of emotional response in his characters to the situations in which they find themselves. The result is a drama of considerable linguistic subtlety.

Imagery

Let us now turn to one particular aspect of the language of *Othello*, its imagery. Here we should distinguish between two uses of imagery, the one designed to communicate a vivid and immediate effect, and the other which seeks to weave a 'pattern', helping to draw together the various strands of the dramatic action into some coherent design. This principle of design is especially necessary when we remember that in performance the spectator has no control of the pace at which a play moves forward, unlike the reader of, say, a novel, who has absolute control over the pace of his reading. The dramatist therefore, has to find ways of helping his audience to recall what has already taken place, and to arouse certain expectations of what is to come. The interplay

between these elements is usually the source of dramatic irony. The general term that we use for this design is 'structure', and it is part of the task of the literary critic to try to recognise and establish plausible relationships of meaning between the various elements which make up the play's structure. The use and distribution of particular images throughout a play like *Othello*, is an important aspect of its structure.

One of the functions of imagery in a Shakespeare play is to help us to visualise more clearly particular facets of dramatic action and character. For example, Othello's control of military affairs is vividly portrayed in an image which suggests extraordinary powers of endurance.

The tyrant custom, most grave senators,
Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war
My thrice-driven bed of down: (I.3.229-31)

That a 'flinty and steel couch of war' should become a 'thrice-driven bed of down', captures in vivid visual terms Othello's capacity to exert control over adverse conditions. Lodovico uses a slightly different image to convey the same idea when he later refers to Othello's 'solid virtue' which: 'The shot of accident, nor dart of chance,/Could neither graze nor pierce.' (IV.1.262-4). But in addition to presenting us with vivid visual pictures, images are often designed to communicate feeling, and to elicit some sort of non-visual response from us. The two examples quoted indicate that we should not only visualise these descriptions of Othello, but we must also evaluate his qualities as a character capable of exerting such control. Thus our sympathies are either engaged, as they are in the first example, or alienated, as they are in the second.

However, the play contains more complex images which reflect, in concentrated form, a major part of the tragic action. One such occurs at the point when Othello confronts Desdemona after having shocked Lodovico with his intemperate behaviour towards her. Othello's loss of control is extreme, and extends even to his failure to understand the true meaning of what his wife says. When she asks 'Alas, what ignorant sin have I committed?' (IV.2.72), he seizes on the equivocal meaning of the word 'committed' (in a manner similar to that of Brabantio's response to the Duke's 'sentences' in I.3.216-7):

What, committed?
Committed! O thou public commoner!
I should make very forges of my cheeks,
That would to cinders burn up modesty,
Did I but speak thy deeds. (IV.2.74-8)

On the visual level Othello is depicting the intensity of his blushes were he to speak of the indecent actions that he believes Desdemona has

committed. But the word 'forges' is made to carry a considerable and rich burden of ambiguity here. The blushes would convert Othello's cheeks into 'forges' (the blacksmith's fires), but this would have the effect of falsifying (forging) the naturally black colour of his face, just as he believes Desdemona's 'fair' appearance is now a 'forgery'. 'Modesty' is converted into the fuel which feeds this imaginary fire, and Othello's red cheeks reflect his own embarrassment as he receives the heat from the fire of Desdemona's imagined lust. We might also note here that the 'blacksmith' image hints at Othello's kinship with Vulcan, the smithy of the Gods who was cuckolded by Venus and Mars. Thus, in addition to our having a vivid sense of what Othello thinks of the deception he believes Desdemona has been practising, we also respond to the tragic irony of his position.

These are just a few of the many examples of the different uses to which Shakespeare puts poetic language in *Othello*. But they do form part of a pattern of recurring images, whose function is to keep before us the issues and conflicts which comprise the action of the play. Iago's cynical interpretation of experience derives its power from his consistent ability to visualise human beings *reduced*, often to the level of animals. His description of Othello as 'an old black ram', and of Desdemona as a 'white ewe' (I.1.88-9) are obvious examples, and we might add to this the view of the marriage as 'a frail vow betwixt an erring barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian' (I.3.356-7). But this is part of the image of humanity that Othello himself moves towards as he falls victim to Iago's potent 'medicine' of deception. Thus, when Desdemona weeps in the presence of Lodovico, Othello interprets her gesture in the following manner:

O devil, devil!

If that the earth could teem with women's tears
Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile:
(IV.1.239-41)

A little later in the same scene, having been told that Cassio is to replace him as governor of Cyprus, he storms off with the exclamation: 'Goats and monkeys!' (IV.1.259). Significantly, in his final speech of the play, it is the 'animal' in himself that Othello kills: 'I took by the throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him thus.' (V.2.336-7).

reductive view of humanity

As a contrast to this reductive view of humanity, we should notice the ways in which Desdemona is described. Cassio refers to her as 'The divine Desdemona' (II.1.73), and Othello early in the play calls her a 'fair warrior' and his 'soul's joy' (II.1.182-4). Even Roderigo, naive in the face of Iago's cynical outlook characterises her as being 'full of most blest condition' (II.1.247). Images of divinity, perfection, and order,

are used to describe her, the most prophetic of which is Othello's comment immediately before his own fall into chaos:

Excellent wretch, perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee, and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.

(III.3.91-3)

Finally, having realised the magnitude of his error, Othello revalues Desdemona, likening her to a precious jewel which he has cast away: 'of one whose hand, / Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away, / Richer than all his tribe.' (V.2.347-9). These two contrasting sets of images provide a foundation for some of the more intricate features of the dramatic action, and contribute to the overall structure of the play.

Dramatic irony

Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony in *Othello* is extensive, involving both situations and characters. Irony arises from our awareness of the discrepancy between what the characters themselves believe is happening, and what is actually taking place. For example, because Iago tells us what he intends to do with his victims, we can judge the disparity between the knowledge he provides for us, and their comparative ignorance of his designs. Roderigo, Brabantio, Cassio, and finally, Othello are all ignorant of some aspects of the situations into which Iago forces them, and this culminates in the supreme tragic irony when Othello believes that in killing Desdemona he is acting in accordance with the dictates of Justice. Indeed, at the very point in Act V, Scene 2 where he considers in soliloquy the irrevocable nature of his action, he claims that her very 'breath' has the power to pervert the course of Justice; it can 'almost persuade Justice herself to break her sword.' (V.2.15-16). Although *he* believes that the murder he is about to commit is lawful, we know that Desdemona's 'breath' has neither the power nor the inclination to pervert Justice in this way. In fact, the opposite is true; had Othello responded to Desdemona's qualities more positively here, then he would have acted in a fair and just manner. As it is, he misreads the sign of her purity, and decides to kill her. Here we are in a position to appreciate in the fullest sense, the way in which the 'appearance' as defined by Othello, is made to contrast with what we know to be the 'reality'. But the situation is more complicated, even, than that. There is a double irony involved in that Othello comes to believe that there is a discrepancy between Desdemona's 'appearance' and what he alleges she really is, and that this is, in fact, a feature of human experience in a more general sense; for example, just as he is persuaded to believe in the inevitability of his own fate.

Yet 'tis the plague of great ones,
Prerogativ'd are they less than the base,
'Tis destiny, unshunnable, like death:
Even then this forked plague is fated to us
When we do quicken:

(III.3.277-81)

so he also accepts the dubious wisdom of Iago's later pronouncement, that Desdemona's apparent deception is, in fact, a hellish joke at man's expense:

O, 'tis the spite of hell, the fiend's arch-mock,
To lip a wanton in a secure couch,
And to suppose her chaste.

(IV.1.70-2)

These two statements, placed in the mouths of deceiver and victim contribute to the pattern of irony which emerges in the play. Indeed, while Othello is led to believe that his own disgrace accords with the very workings of fate itself, we look beyond the local context of his remark, to the more general Christian notion of the 'fall of man', and of the traditional conflict between 'good' and 'evil'.

In addition to what is generally called situational irony of this kind, there is also verbal irony, more localised in its effect. For example, Iago's grim comments about Othello's 'openness' or Cassio's handsomeness (I.3.395ff.) are, in effect, satiric indications of what in certain circumstances may be construed as weaknesses. Iago's ironic detachment from his victims is a stance which he invites us to share, but the play never allows us to come too close to the position he occupies. Perhaps one of the best examples of this kind of irony occurs when, for the first time in the play, Othello is forced to question the validity of the very 'parts' which earlier, in Act I Scene 2 he was convinced would show his character to full advantage (I.2.31-3). It is characteristic of Shakespeare's treatment of his hero here, that he does not allow him a soliloquy until he has been brought to the point of doubting his own adequacy:

Haply for I am black,
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declin'd
Into the vale of years—yet that's not much—

(III.3.267-70)

His 'blackness', now no longer a neutral 'fact', assumes a new significance, while his earlier skill in 'conversation' is now thought to be inadequate. Othello's 'blackness' will, ultimately become the symbol of evil itself, while his loss of 'conversation' (in a literal as well as a metaphor-

ical sense) will indicate the extent to which the harmonious language, which he shared with Desdemona in the first two acts of the play, has been destroyed. Thus, at this crucial point in the action, Othello's conception of himself does not accord with our knowledge of his character and his predicament. His description of his deficiencies seems ironical to us, because we know more than he does about his situation. Throughout the play there are many examples of irony, deepening our awareness of the nature of the tragic action, and controlling our responses to character and situation.

Scenes and structure

Our concern with imagery has really been a concern with some of the fundamental details of dramatic structure. Another basic unit of structure is the 'scene', since it is through the careful positioning of individual scenes in the play that a pattern of meaning begins to emerge. Scenes are usually separated from each other by distinct pauses as one group of characters leaves the stage and is replaced by another. An obvious example occurs at the end of Act I Scene 1 when the stage is cleared, so that Act I Scene 2 can begin at Othello's lodgings. The pause signifies a change of place, but it also creates a tension since we now eagerly await the confrontation between Brabantio and Othello that Iago and Roderigo have engineered. In this connection the entry of Cassio at I.2.34, increases the tension even further. But we notice also in the play that certain changes of focus (not place) occur within individual scenes, rather similar to the way in which a film camera focuses now on one object, then on another. Although these are not 'scenes' in the strict sense of the term, they are comparable units of design through which the action gradually unfolds. For example, in Act I Scene 1 the street dialogue between Iago and Roderigo acts as a kind of prologue, and is followed by another dialogue, this time involving Brabantio. But the prologue, which ends with Roderigo's comment: 'Here is her father's house, I'll call aloud.' (I.1.74), has already provided us with information which gives the second dialogue an ironical twist as we see the old man being manipulated. In this way we accumulate knowledge of the various stages of the action. We may notice much later on in the play, at III.4 the appearance of the Clown in a dialogue which acts as a prologue to the interview between Othello and Desdemona, and which focuses specifically on the different meanings of particular words. The linguistic uncertainty which the Clown promotes, foreshadows the wider uncertainty which Othello feels as he tries to extract offensive meanings from the words that Desdemona uses:

OTHELLO: Give me your hand; this hand is moist, my lady.

DESDEMONA: It yet hath felt no age, nor known no sorrow.
 OTHELLO: This argues fruitfulness, and liberal heart;
 Hot, hot and moist, this hand of yours requires
 A sequester from liberty;

(III.4.32-6)

Just as for the Clown the word 'lie' admits of alternative meanings, so here the words 'hot' and 'moist' suggest for Othello sexual licence, whereas for Desdemona they signify innocence and youth. This kind of juxtaposition serves to enlarge the scope of the play's concern.

The ordering of incidents is even more revealing in Act I Scene 3, which comprises *four* separate movements: (1) the dialogue concerning the activities of the Turkish fleet (2) the 'trial' of Othello (3) The dialogue between Iago and Roderigo (which echoes the opening dialogue of the play) (4) Iago's concluding soliloquy. Clearly, Shakespeare seeks to build a pattern here which will help us to compare the values which inform the attitudes and actions of the characters involved. Using his powers of right judgement, the Duke weighs the evidence in a matter of political importance. We then observe the application of that judgement to a more critical domestic issue, thus establishing a connection between the 'domestic' and 'political' worlds of the play. Moreover, because of the lack of information we are exposed to the competing claims of both the negative and positive arguments surrounding Othello's marriage, and we are encouraged to judge its propriety for ourselves. Thus we become *involved* in the very dilemma in which Othello himself will later be placed. Dramatically, the positioning of Iago's soliloquy at the end rather than the beginning of Act I is crucial. His discussion with Roderigo reinforces in our minds an already lingering doubt, but it is at the point when our resolve is at its weakest that Iago steps forward to draw us into his confidence. We are tempted here, as elsewhere in the play, to approve his frankness, although we must remember that his motive is entirely evil. By noticing how skilfully Shakespeare has positioned these 'scenes' and episodes, we gain a deeper understanding of how the play works.

These scenes are, of course, related to each other in a chronological sequence. But there are a number of examples in the play of repetitions of incident separated from each other by larger spaces in the action. Notice for example, that the events of Act I Scene 3 are repeated as Othello, like the Duke of Venice, is forced to make two related judgements, the first the political one involving Cassio and the safety of the island (II.3.195ff.), and the second a domestic one involving Desdemona (III.3.451ff.). But although the situation Othello is placed in resembles that of the Duke, his behaviour accords more with that of Brabantio.

These are only a few of the many examples in the play of the position-

ing of scenes and incidents which serve to enrich the dramatic action. In each case we should observe carefully the characters involved, and also the context in which these incidents take place. It is this complex web of incident and character which makes the play's structure so complex and dramatically effective.

The time-scale of 'Othello'

Shakespeare's treatment of time in *Othello* raises a problem. For over a century critics have been aware of the discrepancies in the play's time-scale, and have suggested that the inconsistencies are the result of Shakespeare's own uncompleted revisions of his manuscript. In *Shakespearean Tragedy*, A.C. Bradley distinguished between 'Short Time' and 'Long Time', explaining their functions in the following way:

It is not the case that 'Short Time' is wanted only to produce an impression of vehemence and haste, and 'Long Time' for probability. The 'Short Time' is equally wanted for probability: for it is grossly improbable that Iago's intrigue should not break down if Othello spends a week or weeks between the successful temptation and his execution of justice. . . .

The place where 'Long Time' is required is not *within* Iago's intrigue. 'Long Time' is required simply and solely because the intrigue and its circumstances presuppose a marriage consummated and an adultery possible, for (let us say) some weeks. (p.363)

This is a difficult explanation, but Bradley's point seems a fair one, and rather supports the view that there is considerable variation in the pace of the action. We are aware, for example, that the entire action of Act I takes place within the space of one night. Similarly, it would appear that because of the haste of Othello's mission to Cyprus, he and Desdemona have not had the opportunity to consummate their marriage. It would appear also that Othello's arrival in Cyprus, the demise of Cassio, and Iago's temptings take place on the afternoon, night, and morning following each other. The speed of events here gives some substance to Bradley's view that the 'Short Time' scheme lends credibility to Iago's plotting, although it does not entirely account for the speed of Othello's own fall. But we are a little startled to find that in Act III Scene 4, immediately following Othello's temptation and fall, Bianca chides Cassio for not having visited her for a week:

What, keep a week away? seven days and nights?
 Eight score eight hours, and lovers' absent hours,
 More tedious than the dial, eight score times?

(III.4.170-3)

Our impression is that no such interval of time has elapsed between Act III Scene 3, and Act III Scene 4. Similarly, and without any impression of the slackening of the momentum of the plot, in Act IV Scene 1 Othello overhears part of Cassio's account of his meeting with Bianca: 'I was t'other day talking on the sea-bank, with certain Venetians . . .' (IV.1.132). Here again, the details conflict with our sense of the forward pressure of the plot. It may well be, however, that the purpose of these details is to convey an *impression*, rather than to convince us of their literal truth, and that while in the study they present us with problems of a logical nature, in the theatre they contribute more immediately to the atmosphere of the play. As an example, let us take Lodovico's appearance, also in Act IV Scene 1. It serves to recall the former 'noble' Othello, but it also suggests that some time has elapsed since he is now to be recalled to Venice: 'For as I think, they do command him home, / Deputing Cassio in his government.' (IV.1.231-2). It is hardly likely that just having been sent to Cyprus, Othello would be immediately recalled, so that it would appear that a detail of this kind is introduced to further the play's thematic design, and to suggest a series of comparisons and contrasts, rather than to support some kind of uniform time-scale. Whatever the explanations, it is clear that while Iago's plot requires speed, it cannot move too fast since it would cease to be believable, and would affect seriously our own valuation of Othello's character. It may well be that Shakespeare chose to emphasise the intensity of the drama, but sought to reinforce its plausibility by including also a 'background' against which this intensity could be measured.

Hints for study

WHEN READING A PLAY we should always guard against the temptation to treat it as though it were a novel. This is often a difficult point to grasp, but we must always bear in mind that a play is designed primarily to be performed, usually in a particular type of building, a theatre, rather than to be read privately. The novelist's medium is solely the words on the page, and what they contain in the way of meaning gives us the information we require to imagine fully characters and situations. The novelist is also in complete control of the *pace* with which his story unfolds, just as the reader, for his part, is able to control the speed at which he reads it.

But in a play, the kind of detailed description of the lives, relationships, and situations of particular characters that we expect from a novel, is absent, partly because the sheer pressure of performance in a particular place at a particular time makes their inclusion impossible. Also, because his words are designed to be spoken by actors, the dramatist cannot halt the flow of his play, just as members of the theatre audience cannot ask that the action be stopped for a moment to allow individuals to ponder particular details. In a play the dramatist can only work *through* the mouths of his characters, unlike the novelist who can adopt a series of different narrative postures. The action of a play is *embodied* in the characters who present it.

With this in mind we should always remember that in a dialogue in a play our attention is not engaged solely by what the speaker is saying, but also by the actions and responses of the character who is listening. On the printed page a dramatic dialogue seems somehow incomplete. Only in performance does it achieve fullness. Here the physical characteristics of speaker and listener, tones of voice, movements, gestures, and facial expressions all contribute to the play's meaning. Consider, for example, Othello's *silence* at the opening of Act I Scene 2. Iago and Roderigo have, in the previous scene already claimed that his speech is bombastic and his attitude self-centred. But during the first seventeen lines of Act I Scene 2 he speaks only one half-line, and that in the most enigmatic manner imaginable: 'Tis better as it is.' (I.2.6). In order to appreciate the full dramatic impact of this silence, we are required not only to recall what has gone before, but also to *visualise* this confrontation between a garrulous but deceitful villain and a distinctly unyielding hero whose own appearance and utterance are ambiguous. When we

read this scene, we are required to *infer* information about the visual aspects of this dialogue, the tones of voice in which both characters speak, their physical gestures, their appearance, and so on. And of course, as we have seen in the case of *Othello* particularly, this practical necessity of visualising the stage action is used by Shakespeare as an important principle of dramatic design. Throughout we are asked to observe the discrepancies between what we *see* and what we *hear*. Moreover, our understanding of what the Elizabethan theatre looked like, and our sense of the conventions that it imposed upon dramatist, actors, and audience alike, contributes even further to the substance and meaning of the play. All this is part of the adjustment of imaginative perception that we need to make in order to understand fully the text of a play. We must always remember that what we read in the study is really a blueprint for performance, and not a substitute for it.

Characters

In a Shakespeare play characters appear on the stage fully formed, as it were, and any information about their backgrounds or their past lives is only admissible insofar as it is *strictly relevant* to the dramatic action itself. We should be on our guard against questions like 'What kind of personality does Iago have?' since this assumes that he possesses traits of character in addition to those which Shakespeare chose to use in his play. If we think of 'character' in this context as an agency through which the action of the play is revealed to the audience, then we shall avoid the dangers of this kind of question.

How therefore, can we equate this view of dramatic characterisation with the notion that Shakespeare 'humanises' the characters in his plays by giving them traits which make them seem more than simply puppets? We have already seen how he does this in *Othello* with characters like Desdemona, Bianca, Cassio, and Emilia; we know what these characters stand for in the play, but their actions and attitudes are also given some limited plausibility within the confines of the dramatic action. But equally, we cannot enquire too closely into the deeper motivations of a character like Iago. Although he, himself suggests to us a number of motives for his villainy, they do not really stand up to close scrutiny, and we are forced to think of him more obviously in terms of the *function* he fulfils within the overall design of the play.

Bearing this in mind, we should take great care with questions like: 'Why doesn't Othello ask Desdemona straight away in Act III Scene 3 if she has committed adultery with Cassio?'. This is not so simple a question as it seems, nor can we answer it satisfactorily by saying that there is some psychological deficiency in Othello's own character which was there from the start and which refuses to allow him to take this

obvious and positive step. Nor is it simply a question of saying that this is how Shakespeare stretches his material out for a further two acts. If we say that Othello's refusal to confront Desdemona directly is a 'flaw' in his character, then we are faced with the difficulty of justifying his status as tragic hero in the play. So obvious a flaw, indicating a radical personal failure to perceive the truth would force us to relinquish both our sympathy and admiration for him. If this is what Shakespeare intended, then why does he take pains to show how many other characters in the play are deceived by appearances? The affairs involving Roderigo, Brabantio, Cassio, Emilia, and even Lodovico would, in such a context prove to be largely redundant, or at best indications of badly conceived plotting on Shakespeare's part. The fact that Othello shares this failure of perception with a host of other characters in the play suggests that the assumptions he holds about human behaviour before Act III Scene 3 are of a general nature, not peculiar to himself alone, and that even after this point in the play, he is convinced that his new viewpoint is a generally held one. It is no accident that Iago always speaks in generalities, as he seeks to persuade all those with whom he comes into contact, that his opinion is one which is generally held by all:

I know our country disposition well;
In Venice they do not let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands: their best conscience
Is not to leave undone, but keep unknown.
(III.3.205-9)

By the end of Act IV Scene 1, Iago can allow his victim to speak for him: 'And his own courses will denote him so,/That I may save my speech:' (IV.1.275-6). Of course Iago seeks to replace one set of generally held assumptions with another which violates its integrity. That violation finds an ironical echo in Othello's own appearance, which represents a concrete embodiment of the dramatic conflict between 'appearance' and 'reality' which we observed earlier. Thus, the gradual emergence of these shifts in the values which Othello holds, tell us very little about his 'character' or his 'personality', but a lot about the ways in which Shakespeare seeks to dramatise a moral conflict of a very elemental kind. Or, to put it perhaps a little crudely, the character of Othello represents a kind of dramatic cipher, not a person, and when we are dealing with questions about character and motive in Shakespeare's plays we must always bear this in mind.